

Thursday, April 19, 2012

Washington, D.C. – Congressman Ben Ray Luján of New Mexico's Third District introduced legislation to help protect national forests from wildfires while creating jobs in local communities. The Forest Stewardship and Fire Fuels Reduction Act of 2012 is a 10-year reauthorization of a federal program that funds efforts to reduce overgrown vegetation in forests that contributes to the intensity and devastation of wildfires. The bipartisan bill is cosponsored by Congressman Paul Gosar of Arizona.

"Last year our national forests were devastated by wildfires. In New Mexico alone, wildfires destroyed hundreds of thousands of acres of national forests and public lands and ruined watersheds and destroyed other vital natural resources for numerous communities," Congressman Luján said. "The most extensive and serious problem related to the health of our national forests is the over-accumulation of vegetation, which has caused an increasing number of large, intense, and uncontrollable wildfires. Without the removal of hazardous organic fuel material, overgrown forests and organic fuel material increase the risk of wildfires and pose a significant threat to our national forests. Our national forests are one of our country's greatest treasures. This legislation can help restore and maintain healthy forest ecosystems and support a continuing source of local income and employment for rural communities by providing contracts to help maintain healthy forests."

"The Wallow Fire proved that thinning initiatives, such as the White Mountain Stewardship project, can neutralize wildfire and save communities but that significantly more of them need to be implemented," said Congressman Gosar. "Arizonans are tired of being victims of avoidable wildfire conditions. Extending this important tool allows the government to partner with private industry in order to restore the environment, improve public safety, and put people back to work in our national forests. "

Currently, the United States Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are authorized to enter into Stewardship End Result Contracting Projects to improve land management and remove these hazardous organic fuel materials from our national forests. USFS and BLM have used Stewardship End Result Contracting Projects over the last 10 years to reduce the hazard of overgrown vegetation in national forests, however, the authorization for this contracting process is scheduled to end in 2013. The loss of these agreements will limit the ability of the USFS and BLM to carry out fuels reduction and thinning projects in national forests, resulting in increased fire danger and the loss of jobs in the local economies.

Luján introduced similar legislation last year to provide a permanent reauthorization of the contracting process. After working with the Natural Resources Committee and his Republican colleagues, Luján is introducing an updated version with a 10-year reauthorization that has earned bipartisan support. Stewardship End Result Contracting promotes sustainable natural resource management practices in a broad range of activities that improve land conditions including fire fuels reduction and forest thinning projects to help protect forests from wildfires. As an added benefit to local communities, stewardship contracting encourages a closer working relationship between rural communities and federal agencies by promoting economic development through contract opportunities.

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